

Guest blogger - Associate Professor Merrilyn Goos

Topic - Insights on the theory and practice of criterion reference assessment

Date - Monday 10 September 2007 – Friday 14 September

Encouraging review of assessment for learning

Janet and I will be leading a workshop on assessment in the USQ Faculty of Engineering and Surveying soon. Do you have any tips for how to engage our fellow academics in review of assessment for learning?

Regards Mark Phythian

Encouraging review of assessment for learning

Mark

I think Merrilyn could definitely add her experience here or perhaps the UQ colleagues could also contribute. One way working at other universities is to gather those who need and want to change and work on things in groups of twos or threes...perhaps along a program stream. Merrilyn's project I think is doing this as well as projects at Tasminia, Wollongong and Macquarie University

best wishes Janet

Encouraging review of assessment for learning

Dear Mark & colleagues

I think Janet is right in suggesting making a start with people who are likely to be receptive and interested, and have a definite need or goal related to assessment. I've seen this work in a few different ways. My own Carrick Fellowship project has identified/invited a small group of academics across all faculties to start small action research projects related to their assessment needs in a course they teach. This means they own their goals and desired outcomes. Starting small can also increase the chance of success - small gains are noticeable and lessons are learned even from things that don't succeed. Because the academic owns the course they are eager to refine the next iteration and try different approaches.

A second example is happening at UQ right now, arising from the review of the BSc program. A new suite of first year courses is being designed, and the Associate Dean T&L is being very proactive in holding meetings of the course teams and stating clear expectations for each meeting in the form of an agenda that moves them forward in the process of course design and alignment of curriculum/pedagogy/assessment. This has been a great opportunity for articulating an explicit T&L policy at the faculty level and linking it to specific courses - people can immediately see the relevance of policy to their practice. It's also made people from different disciplines/Schools work together on planning a program from the student perspective - maximising connections between courses while avoiding repetition and gaps. And it's prompted many academics to seek help from outside (e.g. the academic development unit, and people like myself) and try new approaches.

I hope this stimulates some useful thinking for you all.

Regards
Merrilyn

Encouraging signs

Thanks Merrilyn

I am currently on a Faculty level Program Review Committee so I may be able to influence aspects of T&L and assessment at that level in some way. Discussions with Janet on our workshop included possible follow up strategies and we agree - starting with interested colleagues and the aim to expand gradually is a good one.

Regards Mark

Linking generic skills to assessment

Hi Merrilyn, nice to meet again in a different forum!

I came across a very good example of embedded academic skills (in this case essay structure) in the curriculum, when I assisted a couple of students in the Learning Center the other day. The course is called Government, Business and Society (POL1000). Rather than the usual assignment task of 'write an essay on...', this assessment item is divided into smaller parts, the last of which is an essay. But each part is individually assessed and helps students to create an appropriate structure for their essay. So they need to first do an annotated bibliography, then create a thesis statement, a set of main points and a mindmap in which they link it all together. Not until they've done that do they start writing their essay. Just thought I'd share this as an example of very effective embedding of 'generic' academic skills. The key in my view is to link it to assessment. What are others' views on this? Do others have good examples of how to do this effectively?

Henk

POL1000 - Government, business and society

Henk,

Thanks for your thoughts on the assignment for POL1000 - I re-wrote the course and the assessment with just this in mind - providing an opportunity for students to develop their research and writing skills with a focus on process and assessing their process as well as their final outcome (the essay). So, we step them through the research process with a small early report on the same topic as the major assignment, an activity to deconstruct the question, an annotated bibliography, a concept map, and then they assess a provided essay using our assessment criteria, and finally they write their own research essay.

Our observed outcomes of taking this approach in the assessment so far has been that it is very effective. We have seen a decrease in the number of students failing, the level of academic

misconduct, and a good increase in the average achievement of students. They also seem to appreciate (from their comments) the attention to letting them know what we expect and the supporting materials developed to help them through each stage of the assessment.

Linking generic skills to assessment

Hi Henk and other colleagues out there

This is a very nice example of how an assessment task can also be an effective learning task. It's easy - but dangerous - to assume that students already know how to write an essay. Often the necessary generic skills are not well developed; and if we don't recognise this then our feedback to the student may miss the mark and cause much frustration. I've also seen examples of this type of progressive assessment used to teach students how to develop a research proposal, lit review, etc for an honours thesis - so in this case it's developing research skills. I know of other examples in my university's natural resources and ag science faculty (Gatton campus, where a series of cumulative tasks is planned around these types of skills - so that by the end of the course the students have produced a substantial written report in gentle stages, with feedback on each successive component.

Is it possible to use this type of assessment in any course? Are there courses where each assessment task has to be separate and complete in itself?

Merrilyn

Stages of writing

Thanks Merrilyn.

I am mostly involved with assessment for writing tasks, and writing inherently involves going through planning stages, so my feeling is that this model could be applied to any writing task. However, in a postgraduate context I can think of situations where this approach can be seen as 'too supportive', depending on the objectives. At that level, showing the ability to independently organise yourself and come up with a finished product (a piece of writing) can be part of the objectives or desired outcomes. In this case, breaking this process up into pre-determined stages would probably get in the way of such desired outcomes.

I'm not very familiar with science or math assignments that do not involve writing, but I can imagine that some of these would not necessarily lend themselves to this approach. But others would be able to shed more light on this.

Henk

Assessment for learning

Merrilyn and some of her colleagues from the University of Queensland will join this discussion throughout the week commencing on Monday. Assessment is a hot topic at USQ as it is in many universities across Australia. We all have many questions about how and why. In a recent talk I attended by David Boud he indicated that in the last 10 years too much effort had been placed on

the measurement components of assessment and very little on learning. His focus along with Merrilyn's has been to refocus our thoughts back to students and their learning. You can listen to Merrilyn's thoughts on the LTSU web page. <http://www.usq.edu.au/ltsu/plan/goos.htm>

In this blog we hope to get down to specifics -

What assessment strategies have you used that do support student learning?

Are they useful in USQ's flexible distance/online environment?

What are the successes? What are the challenges?

best wishes Janet,

Janet Taylor, Learning and Teaching Support Unit

Assessment for learning - some UQ examples

Hi Janet and colleagues at USQ (and UQ)

I thought I'd share some ideas of UQ colleagues with whom I'm working in my Carrick Fellowship project. (I hope they will log on and post their own comments also.)

One course coordinator is interested in student perceptions of feedback. We know that this is a significant area of student dissatisfaction with assessment, but do we really understand what students mean when they say they don't get enough feedback? This course coordinator is using a short survey to find out what students are learning, what they think of the assignments, and what kind of feedback they consider helpful. As well as asking the latter as an open ended question, I've suggested inserting some prompts to get students to think about -

- * what kind of difficulties you had in doing the assignment
- * whether you prefer feedback in the form of marks or written comments
- * whether you prefer verbal or written feedback
- * how important is the timing of the feedback.

It would also be interesting to ask students to explain how they normally *use* assignment feedback; for example, does feedback affect how they tackle the next assignment? (We hope so?!)

I also had a conversation yesterday with a colleague who is designing a new course about biodiversity and wants to try an innovative assessment task. The task has students working in groups of 4 to make a documentary style video that communicates a significant scientific message about ecology. As a bonus, a TV producer who works on a well known science TV program will select the best 10 or so videos and have them professionally re-shot and broadcast ... how's that for authenticity! But how should the lecturer assess the students' work on this task? Does anyone have experience in assessing non-written work or visual presentations? What advice should this lecturer give to his students about what counts as good quality work?

Merrilyn

Assessing visual assignments

Hi Merrilyn,

I have some experience in assessing visual presentations (mostly in relation to web design). I guess the most obvious advice is to clearly lay out your objectives. These could be related to the actual content, but also to the way this content is organised in a visual manner. For example, are visual techniques used to advance a particular argument? Or are they used to provide information? In the former case, is the argument developed in an 'objective' way, or are certain techniques used to engage the viewer emotionally? Each of these questions would need to relate to the learning objectives of the course, and there are many more of such questions one can ask.

If that lecturer wants to be even more innovative, he/she could use a form of peer assessment. As students are already in groups of four, each individual in the group could be asked to write a paragraph in which they assess the work of another group. Alternatively this can be done in a face-to-face context, where it could lead to a wider class discussion. This could also involve suggestions on how to improve for the next assessment task, and this type of peer assessment would make it more likely that students are affected by it and therefore more likely to incorporate it into their next assignment.

What do others think?

Henk

Assessing visual assignments

Thanks Henk, I'll pass on these ideas to my colleague. I've already reminded him that his assessment criteria need to align with the course objectives and inform the students about what qualities are valued in the task. I think he'll welcome the idea of peer assessment - this course is expecting 900+ first year students so planning for peer assessment in an authentic way not only shares the assessment load but can engage students with the subject matter and get them accustomed to university assessment expectations.

Merrilyn

Reference

Merrilyn,

Forgot to give you a reference with some interesting strategies for student peer reviewing and marking, so here it is:

http://ewds.strath.ac.uk/Portals/2/CSL/t2%20-%20great%20designs%20for%20assessment/collaborative%20writing%20in%20divergent%20disciplines/Essay_writing_with_peer_reviewing_and_marking.pdf

Cheers,

Henk